

It's the day before the first parade and a Plebe (freshman) is confused about how to put his dress gray uniform together. He asks his battle buddy, who says, "Go ask your team leader or squad leader." Sound strange? Well, not at West Point.

West Point mirrors the regular Army's chain of command and the Non-commissioned Officer support channel from the team leader through brigade command level. Cadets will serve in many of these positions to enhance their leadership skills.

Regular Army sergeants first class (Tactical Noncommissioned Officers or TACs), assigned to each of the Corps' 36 companies, assist cadets in operating the NCO support channel. This program is unique because cadets are put into leadership positions two out of the four years they spend at West Point. They're charged with carrying out the everyday business of the Corps of Cadets under the supervision of the senior class.

These duties range from simple room inspection to the basics of rifle marksmanship training.

Regular Army NCOs will see well-prepared second lieutenants coming from West Point. They will be leaders who understand the concept of leading by example, complying with orders and meeting standards.

Throughout the year, the TAC NCO teaches cadet NCOs leadership principles and philosophies through a series of classes, including military science, cadet professional development and honor classes. The TAC NCOs then observe, coach and counsel all cadet NCOs on their performance. Sessions can range from one-on-one, face-to-face performance counseling to simple on-the-spot correction.

Cadet Hans Pung, the highest ranking cadet at the Academy, agrees that we [the TAC NCOs] are enhancing the development of graduates by being available at the company level. These NCOs are there to guide, train and mentor, as

well as to answer any of the cadets' questions. Cadet Pung says, "The cadet first sergeants receive a lot of guidance from the TAC NCOs because of their many years of experience. This allows the cadet to train and lead more effectively; the same way we will when we graduate."

The brigade command sergeant major is charged with executing the business of the NCO support channel through his regimental and battalion sergeants ma-

NCOs at West Point

"The purpose of this training is not to make officers proficient NCOs, but to have them walk in the shoes of someone similar to an NCO in today's Army. Platoon sergeants can relax. You and your new lieutenants—together—can provide the Army with the best trained and motivated platoon in the big green machine."

jor. This tough, demanding position challenges the cadets that much more due to their lack of experience. The cadets' lack of experience requires initiative and creativity to get the job done and the Corps has plenty of both. The NCO support channel has been very effective in making improvements in drill and ceremonies, NCO training, barracks cleanliness and maintenance and the caring aspects that are so much of an NCO's daily duties.

SFC John McNally, Company H-1, says little published material exists that explains the "how to's" of being first sergeants and the training of their subordinates. He uses his TAC NCO as a source of first-hand knowledge on what is expected of an NCO and how to enhance performance of cadet leaders in the company.

SFC Phil Otey, a three-year TAC NCO, was one of the first TACs at company level. He believes that the best part of the system is that it gives cadets a chance to work and interact with NCOs.

This in turn helps them form a better relationship with the platoon sergeants and squad leaders they will be working with when they report to their first unit.

The system isn't perfect, but it improves every year. With each year, cadets increase their understanding of NCO positions and their effectiveness in those critical roles. In return it shows the TAC and TAC NCO that they [the cadet NCOs] are ready to move up and handle cadet officer duties during their senior

or "Firstie" year. A successful tour as a cadet NCO can lead to some of the more premiere cadet officer leadership positions in the Corps.

Cadet Chris Rietsma, who was a sergeant before coming to West Point, said, "In the past, half of the junior class and the entire senior class held all the NCO and officer positions in the Corps. Now, the sophomore class gets a chance to start honing their leadership skills early. It allows us to progress into increased responsibility with the experience of each year spent at the Academy."

Another high point of the program is that during the summer, instead of hanging out at Daytona Beach, cadet leadership is afforded the opportunity to take their units through tough, hands-on, performance-oriented training. Some cadet NCOs teach the basics to new cadets during cadet basic training.

Summer training culminates with a full-scale deployment on combat aircraft to Ft. Knox, KY, for a one-week mechanized train-up and STX, ending with a force-on-force battle with Abrams main battle tanks. Cadet NCOs are responsible for all individual training that's needed for the battle.

"The training cadets receive here at West Point, as NCOs, is by far superior to any other commissioning program that I've experienced in my 18 years in the Army. You just can't find the intensity anywhere else," declares the regimental TAC NCO, SFC Jose Romero. ■

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